Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 36 Article 9

10-1-2010

Will the Jesuit Tradition of Intellectual Life Survive?

John Aloysius Coleman 1937-

Will the Jesuit Tradition of Intellectual Life Survive?

Not if it's left entirely to campus ministry

By John A. Coleman, S.J.

At their inception, as is well known, the first Jesuits did not envision any apostolate involving schools or universities. Engagement in schools came somewhat unexpectedly *to* rather than *from* them through the earnest entreaties of civic leaders in cities, such as Messina and Palermo, asking the Jesuits to undertake schools for the training of their sons. Of course, most of the first companions of Ignatius shared with him a first-class education at the University of Paris. Thus, although, by and large, most priests of that time acquired their priestly knowledge through a mere hands-on apprenticeship in parishes, the first Jesuits did demand a learned ministry and a university education for the professed members of their Society.

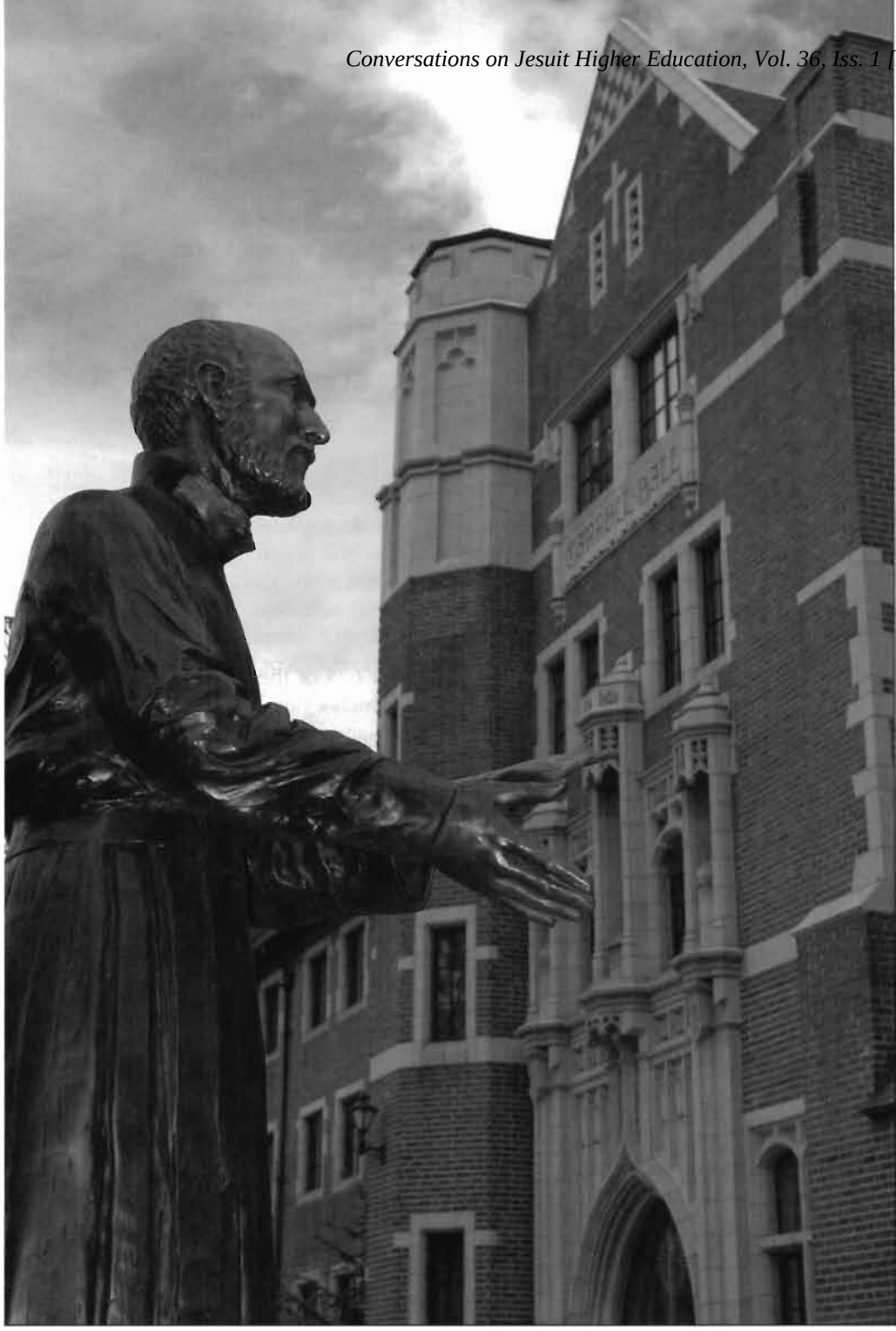
Question #1: Was there, historically, a Jesuit Ideal of a University and the Intellectual Life ?

It is probably not the case that one can really find any full-blown theory of a university nor a worked-out position on the intellectual life in the earliest documents of the Jesuits. The Jesuit rationale for accepting schools or starting universities was primarily justified by the Ignatian criteria for choosing ministries, found in part 7 of *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* where the choice of university work falls under the rubric of ministries which embody a more universal good. Number 622 of Part 7 notes that preference should be given to ministries which aim at large nations, important cities " or to universities which are generally attended by numerous persons who, if aided themselves, can become laborers for the help of others." Number 623 of the same part 7 seems to favor ministries which extend to a greater number of people, "such as lecturing" in preference to one-to-one ministries whose reach was more restricted.

The Constitutions, part 4, deals with the intellectual-spiritual formation of Jesuits in training and with Jesuit schools and universities. The thrust of part 4 is almost entirely based on apostolic purposes. Jesuit schools should aim to educate those who will have more influence in the world of civil and religious affairs. One looks in vain, however, in part 4 of *The Constitutions*, for any true intrinsic Jesuit theory of a university or of the intellectual life. Indeed, all of the treatment of education, in part 4, tends toward a species of subordination, a merely utilitarian view of education, rather than any deeper or tutored sense of knowledge as a good in itself. In a succinct manner, the motive for accepting the governance of universities is stated: "in which these benefits may be spread more universally, both through the subjects which are taught and the numbers of persons who attend and the degrees which are conferred, so that the recipients may teach with authority elsewhere what they have learned well in these universities for the glory of God our Lord". (# 440)

...very early Jesuit universities spawned confraternities through which students engaged in social service...

John A. Coleman S.J., is associate pastor, Saint Ignatius Church, San Francisco.



Statue of Saint Ignatius, Regis University.

To be sure, part 4 does go on to treat issues of the subjects to be taught (theology, rhetoric and humanities; but not law or medicine) and of issues of pedagogy. Because Ignatius had started life as a kind of autodidact, he came to see that pursuing studies in an order that builds on earlier foundations was essential. So, the order of studies is treated in part 4. Throughout, there is an abiding assumption that studies will be closely related to spiritual growth of the students and their civic involvement. In point of fact very early on Jesuit universities spawned confraternities through which students and alumni engaged in projects of social service and civic reform and betterment in their university's host city.

We neglect, however, another important source for understanding the Jesuit tradition of the intellectual life, if we restrict ourselves only to *The Constitutions*. Obviously, a deep Ignatian grounding for the intellectual life derives from *The Spiritual Exercises's* "Contemplation for Obtaining Love," The *Contemplatio* can yield a peculiarly Ignatian motif of knowledge as a good in itself, not just as a useful means for apostolic goals. The Ignatian intuition of the *Contemplatio* directs us to look to God's presence and activity in all of creation including the cultural products of human history. Science, philosophy, history, the social disciplines, literature and the arts—all constitute aspects of that "long, loving look at the real" we intend by that term, *contemplation*. *The Contemplatio* invites us to see and taste all that is real in our cosmos, history and culture.

But *The Contemplatio* presupposes the rest of the Exercises which went before. So, the First Principle and Foundation (that all our desires and actions should be ordered to love, serve and worship God) also functions as a norm for Jesuit intellectual life, as does the meditation on the Incarnation which invites to a profound inculturation. The meditations on the suffering of Christ lure us to look at our suffering world, weighed down by injustice. It is only by going beyond the fairly utilitarian apostolic priorities of *The Constitutions* (yet still keeping its thrust) to this deeper rooting in the *Contemplatio* that the document on "Jesuits and the University Life," from General Congregation 34, held in 1995, could affirm: "We Jesuits both seek knowledge *for its own sake* and yet must regularly ask knowledge for what?"

After the death of Ignatius, as schools and

universities proliferated, the Jesuit General, Claudio Acquaviva, convened a group of scholars to lend some crucial quality-control and established mission and goals to Jesuit schools. In 1599, the resultant *Ratio Studiorum*, the Magna Carta for Jesuit schools and universities, proposed a plan of studies which included the humanities, literature, history, drama etc., alongside philosophy, science and theology. As historian John O'Malley has argued, the *Ratio Studiorum* "assumed that the humanistic program of the Renaissance was compatible with the Scholastic program of the Middle Ages." O'Malley also notes that "The *Ratio* had all the benefits and all of the defects of such codifications; while it set standards, for instance, it discouraged innovation." But the Jesuit commitment to education meant that the Society of Jesus as an institution had a systematic relationship to 'secular' learning, in and through its universities.

Three Important Motifs

Historians of the pre-suppression Jesuit schools and universities have noted three important motifs which pervaded their operating mission. *First*, the Jesuit universities embodied the humanist heritage. This meant more than merely teaching Latin and Greek literature or rhetoric and languages. More deeply, it involved a wedding of the imagination, deep sensitivity, to any correlative move toward "objective or philosophic knowledge." One notes, again, a congruence between this educational ideal and the emphasis in *The Exercises* about approaching prayer through the scriptures with imagination and an appropriated use of "the senses." Jesuit universities became centers for the arts for their surrounding cities. Art, music, drama, dance and literature were seen as core to education, not just as extra-curricular add-ons. The Latin word *humanitas* translates the Greek word *paideia*. Both came to mean both a process of learning and a result: studies that developed moral goodness, devotion to truth and a disposition to act for the civic good.

Second, although, at the time the rise of the research university (mainly a nineteenth century innovation) lay long in the future, the early Jesuit universities did more than simply pass on the best of received knowledge. They diffused knowledge, to be sure, but also engaged in original research in areas of astronomy, pharmacological knowledge (deriving from new medicines, such as quinine, discovered by Jesuit missionaries), physics. So, besides being centers of art, the Jesuit universities were centers of learning and the discovery of new knowledge. To the humanist heritage was added objective scholarship concerning science and philosophy.

Third, especially through the attempts of the *Ratio Studiorum* to coordinate Jesuit education world-wide and stamp the schools' equivalents to mission-statements, Jesuit education became a network that transcended ordinary boundaries of language, culture and nationhood. It was—however fragilely so—an educational system which was intercultural and global in perspective. As one thoughtful response to Jesuit university education today from the Jesuits at Boston College has put it, reflecting on this earlier Jesuit history: "An idea of the university that proposed that students should study the best of human culture, relate this to their experience of God, use their knowledge for the common good, and imagine themselves as citizens of a global culture concerned about the well being of all people, is certainly relevant to the needs of our own time."

The contemplations on the suffering of Christ lure us to look on our suffering world.

I have addressed, at least in germ, the first question I brought to this essay: "Was there, historically, a Jesuit ideal of a university and the intellectual life?" My next question is: "What recent shifts in Jesuit thinking have impact on or have shifted this historical Jesuit ideal?"

Question #2: New Directions for the Jesuit Intellectual Ideal Since Vatican Council II

To a large extent, the post-suppression Jesuit schools and universities were heavily implicated in the agenda of restoration and of resistance to modern thought that was characteristic of so much intellectual life in the 19th [and the first half of the 20th] century Catholicism. Vatican II, however, shifted the church from an earlier unjustified triumphalism to a greater sense of being a pilgrim church; from wholesale condemnation of or isolation from the others to dialogue. Jesuit documents on universities and the intellectual life, accordingly, take on, in the post-Vatican II period, new themes of ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue and a reading of the signs of the times. (cf. Documents of GC34).

Centers of discovery of new knowledge

Crucial to this shift in understanding of the Jesuit intellectual ideal was the 1973 remarkable address, to alumni of Jesuit schools, by Pedro Arrupe, the Superior General of the Jesuits, on "Men for Others,"

In it, he called for a thorough re-education for justice and insisted that "we cannot separate personal conversion from structural social reform." "For the structures of this world—our customs, our social, economic and political systems, our commercial relations, in general, the institutions we have created for ourselves—insofar as they have injustice built into them—are the concrete forms in which sin is objectified." Arrupe called for a life-long continuing education, one which read the signs of the times and opposed unjust structures in our world.

As is well known, the Jesuit General Congregation 32, held in 1974, boldly took "the service of faith and the promotion of justice" as a new essential hallmark for every Jesuit work, including universities. Throughout the 1970's, Pedro Arrupe wrote a number of very original letters to the Society addressing such issues as "The Intellectual Apostolate in the Society's Mission Today"; "Theological Reflection and Inter-Disciplinary Research"; "Education for Faith and Justice." He underscored that an education for justice and an option for the poor were to become central to the Jesuit intellectual tradition.

Arrupe's successor, Peter Hans Kolvenbach, took up much the same themes in important allocutions to representatives of Jesuit Universities at Santa Clara University in 2000 and in a Rome speech on universities in 2001. General Congregation 34, in its document, "Jesuits and University Life" highlighted Decree 4 on the service of faith and the promotion of justice and insisted that the adjective, Jesuit, before a university, meant that "While we want to avoid any mere instrumentalizing of the university or the reduction of its mission to only one sole legitimate good, the adjective, Jesuit, nonetheless, essentially entails a harmony with the demands of the faith and justice found in Decree 4 of GC 32. The Jesuit university can and must discover in its own institutional forms and authentic purposes a specific and appropriate arena for the encounter with the faith that does justice."

Kolvenbach does not retreat from a commitment to intellectual excellence

In an essay I wrote two decades ago, "A Company of Critics: Jesuits and the Intellectual Life" (*Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 22/25, Nov. 1990), I argued that this new emphasis on bringing the faith that does justice into dialogue with universities and the intellectual life for the very first time brought into the Jesuit intellectual tradition that critical component—the intellectual as social critic and not merely an upholder of the received wisdom and the status quo—which accrued to the modern notion of the intellectual, since the time of the Dreyfus affair in France, when Emile Zola and Anatole France and Marcel Proust published their famous, "Manifeste des Intellectuals," attacking a gross injustice, perpetrated by the French government. I also argued there that this new ideal does not, as such, derogate in any way from the commitment to the intellectual life. It calls, instead, for research and scholarship which asks keenly: Knowledge for what, serving whose interests, furthering what purposes?

From the large panoply of Jesuit documents on this new shift in the Jesuit intellectual tradition, I simply want to cite several short excerpts from Father Kolvenbach's remarkable Rome address: "The Jesuit University in the Light of the Ignatian Charism."

Kolvenbach does not retreat one iota from a commitment to intellectual excellence or from the legitimate freedom of university research. "The university has its own purposes that cannot be subordinated to other objectives. It is essential to respect institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and to safeguard personal and community rights within the requirements of truth and the common good." Kolvenbach notes our continued sense that the choice of Jesuits to work in universities remains a choice for the greater good. "The university remains the place where fundamental questions that touch the person and community can be aired, in the areas of economics, politics, culture, science, theology, the search for meaning. The university should be the bearer of human and ethical values; it should be the critical conscience of the society; it should illuminate with its reflection those who are addressing the problematic of the modern or post-modern society; it should be the crucible where the diverse tendencies in human thought are debated and solutions proposed."

Kolvenbach hearkens back to the earlier transcultural ideal for Jesuit schools: "To the universities corresponds an indispensable role in the critical analysis of globalization, with its positive and negative connotations, to orient the thought and action of society… In the words of John Paul II, it is necessary to contribute to the 'globalization of solidarity.' The 'complete person,' the ideal of Jesuit education for more than four centuries, will, in the future, be a

A class being conducted on the lawn at Marquette University.

competent, conscientious person, capable of compassion and 'well-educated in solidarity.'" In a further remark, connected with global solidarity, Kolvenbach insists that: "By definition, universality and the possibility of exchanges at all levels belong to the very nature of the university."

Finally, Decree 3 of General Congregation 35, held in 2008, "Challenges in Our Mission Today: Sent to the Frontiers" urges bearers of the Jesuit intellectual tradition to, among other things, go to the intellectual frontiers. It picks up again the same theme of living in a globalized world. Decree 6 of that same Congregation, "Collaboration at the Heart of Mission," reminds Jesuits that their works are dependent on a close collegial collaboration with men and women of good will, of many religions or no religious background, who can unite in a common sense of mission and commitment to a shared intellectual ideal.

Whether this intellectual tradition remains viable will depend on that collaborative work of Jesuits and their collaborators at universities. By any reckoning, only an on-going, even persistent, collaborative conversation at Jesuit universities about the Jesuit intellectual ideal will assure its continued viability. It will not be viable if, as I heard one Jesuit at a Jesuit university recently tell me, the Jesuit mission will be almost entirely carried by campus ministry! In some cases, moves toward a Catholic studies minor or major – as I saw when I was on the faculty at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles—may revive that earlier Jesuit ideal of the Catholic Jesuit university as a center of arts. Imagination about insertion programs, service learning, core curriculum and the infusion of courses on the ethical issues dealing with poverty, structural justice and globalization will contribute to making alive again a long and often vibrant intellectual tradition which, as I noted earlier, seems as potentially relevant today as in the past. ■

...one said the mission would be almost entirely carried out by campus ministry...